

THE UNDERTAKERS

BY RUDYARD KIPLING.

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The jackal winced, though he was full three seasons old, but you cannot resent an insult from a person with a beak a yard long, and the power of driving like a jarralin. The adjutant was a most notorious coward, but the jackal was worse.

"We must live before we can learn," said the mugger, "and there is this to say. The jackals are very common, child, but such a mugger as I am is not common. For all that I am not proud, since pride is destruction; but take notice, it is fate, and against his fate no one who swims or walks or runs should say anything at all. I am well contented with fate. With good luck, a keen eye, and the custom of considering whether a creek or a backwater has an outlet to it ere you ascend, much may be done."

"Gee! I heard that even the Professor of the Poor made a mistake," said the jackal viciously. "True, but there my fate helped me. It was before I had come to my full growth—before the last famine but three (by the Right and Left of Ganga, how full the streams under in those days). Yes, I was young and unthinking, and when the flood came who so possessed as I? A little made me very happy then. The village was deep in flood, and I swam above the ghant and went far inland, up to the rice-fields, and they were deep in good mud. I remember also a pair of bracelets (glass they were, and troubled me not a little) that I found that evening. Yes, glass bracelets, and, if my memory serves me well, a shoe. I should have shaken off both shoes, but I was hungry. I learned better later. Yes, and so I fed and rested me; but when I was ready to go to the river again the flood had fallen, and I walked through the mud of the main street. Who but I? Came out all my people, priests and women and children, and I looked upon them with benevolence. The mud is not a good place to fight in. Said a boatman: 'Get axes and kill him.

ple. My people do not swim in companies with their mouths out of the water, as Rowa does; nor do they constantly rise to the surface of the water, and turn over on their sides, like Mohoo and little Chappa, nor do they gather in shoals after flood, like Bateeha and Chilwa."

"All are very good eating," said the adjutant, clattering his beak. "So my cousin says, and makes a great deal over hunting them, but they do not climb the banks to escape his sharp nose. My people are otherwise. Their life is on the land, in the houses, among the cattle. I must know what they do and what they are about to do, and, adding the tail to the trunk, as the saying is, I make up the whole elephant. Is there a green branch and an iron ring hanging over a doorway? The old mugger knows that a boy has been born in that house, and must come down to the ghant to play. Is a maiden to be married? The old mugger knows for soes the man carry gifts back and forth and she, too, comes down to the ghant to bathe before her wedding, and—he is there. Has the river changed its channel, and made new land where there was only sand before? The mugger knows."

"Now, of what use is that knowledge?" said the jackal. "The river has shifted even in my little life." Indian rivers are nearly always moving about in their beds, and will shift sometimes as much as two or three miles in a season, drowning the fields on one bank, and spreading good silt on the other.

"There is no knowledge so useful," said the mugger, "for new land means new quarrels." The mugger knows. Oh! The mugger knows. As soon as the water has drained off he creeps up the little creeks that men think would not hide a dog, and there he waits. Presently comes a farmer saying he will plant cucumbers here, and melons there, in the new land that the river has given him. He feels the good mud with his bare toes. Anon comes another, saying he will put onions and carrots and sugar cane in such and such places. They meet as boats adrift meet, and each rolls his eye at the other under the big blue turban. The old mugger sees and hears. Each calls the other 'brother,' and they go to mark out the boundaries of the new land. The mugger hurries with them from point to point, shuffling very low through the mud. Now they begin to quarrel! Now they say hot words! Now they pull turbans! Now they lift up their lathis (clubs), and at last one falls backward into the mud and the other runs away. When he comes back

had it from a brother, who told me, that in Calcutta of the South all the jackals were as fat as others in the rains," said the jackal, his mouth watering at the bare thought of it.

"Ah, but the white faces are there—the English, and they bring dogs from somewhere down the river, in boats—big fat dogs—to keep those same jackals lean," said the adjutant.

"They are, then, as hard-hearted as these people? I might have known. Neither earth, sky, nor water shows charity to a jackal. I saw the tents of a white face last season, after the rains, and I also took a new yellow brittle to eat. The white faces do not dress their leather in the proper way. It made me very sick."

"That was better than my case," said the adjutant. "When I was in my third season, a young and bold bird, I went down to the river where the big beaks come. The boats of the English are three as big as this village."

"He has been as far as Delhi, and says all the people there walk on their heads," muttered the jackal. The mugger opened his left eye and looked keenly at the adjutant.

"It is true," the big bird insisted. "A liar only lies when he hopes to be believed. No one who had not seen those boats could believe this truth."

"That is more reasonable," said the mugger. "And then?"

"From the insides of this boat they were taking out great pieces of white stuff, which in a little while turned to water. Much sputtled off and fell about on the shore, and the rest they swiftly put into a house with thick walls. But a boatman, who laughed, took a piece no larger than a small dog and threw it to me. I—all my people—swallow without reflection, and that piece I swallowed as is our custom. Immediately I was afflicted with an excessive cold that, beginning in my crop, ran down to the extreme end of my toes, and deprived me even of speech, while the boatmen laughed at me. Never have I felt such cold. I danced in my grief and amazement till I could recover my breath, and then I danced and cried out against the falseness of this world; and the boatmen derided me till they fell down. The chief wonder of the matter, setting aside that marvelous coldness, was that there was nothing at all in my crop when I had finished my lamentings."

The adjutant had done his very best to describe his feelings after swallowing a seven-pound lump of ice off an American leech-ship, in the days before Calcutta made her ice by machinery; but, as he did not know what leech was, and as the mugger and the jackal knew rather less, the tale missed fire.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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A mussuck is a tanned goat-skin which, when used by water-carriers, has all the openings sewn up except at the neck, and is in use throughout all those parts of India where British civilization has not laid on pipes. For the race they are inflated with air, the neck of the opening closed, and the racers have to bestride them and make their way by paddling along the bath.

Those who hurry get underneath, while the wary one who goes slowly preserves his equilibrium to the end and is hailed the winner.

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